

NATURALISM IN RELIGION: EASTERN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES AS REFLECTED IN SWAMI VIVEKANANDA AND JOHN DEWEY'S PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: Naturalism in religion today is generally associated with a rejection of most forms of religious practices. However in the early twentieth century America, naturalism, in its methodological form, was used to defend the core truths of religion rather than oppose it by two prominent thinkers, one from the Eastern and the other from the Western world, namely Swami Vivekananda, the Indian spiritual teacher and John Dewey, the great American philosopher. This paper intends to show how Naturalistic interpretation of religion assumed two completely different directions under these thinkers and yet the foundations of religion were secured in divergent ways by their efforts.

I. Introduction

Vivekananda (1863-1902), the 19th century spiritual teacher from India, was instrumental in making the philosophical ideas of Hinduism accessible to America and the western world. In the American popular imagination of the nineteenth century, India was largely unknown; whatever little was known was a largely embellished account, a land of snake charmers populated by masses who followed abominable religious practices, a land untouched by the civilized ideas of the modern world. This myth was effectively countered by Vivekananda by bringing the true import of the philosophical and cultural practices of Hinduism to the West. Even more significantly, Vivekananda tried to show to the West how the ideas of Hinduism were not crude or superstitious but were completely in alignment with the most advanced scientific ideas of the day, in some cases even presaging them. Though his exposition of Hinduism focuses largely on the transcendental aspects of Hindu thought, by trying to explain the philosophy and cultural practices of Hinduism in light of the twin values of Enlightenment-

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rationality and human progress, he can also be said to have espoused a version of religion that is known as religious naturalism. Since the country which accepted Vivekananda wholeheartedly and where his influence was most felt was America, it is quite natural to compare the religious ideas of Vivekananda with John Dewey (1859-1951), the great American thinker and a contemporary of Vivekananda. Dewey, arguably the greatest American philosopher of the 20th century, shaped the minds of generations of Americans through his philosophy of pragmatism. Though he wrote largely in the fields of Logic, Ethics, education and democracy, religion too was something that he deeply thought about and his ideas on religion are scattered through his voluminous writings. Rejecting all forms of supernaturalism in religion, he advocated a form of religion that disowns the stultifying influences of primitive mode of thinking while at the same time, embracing the natural propensity of the human being to seek an ideal world based on the moral faith. Naturalism, therefore, formed the basis on which each of these thinkers tried to understand religion. This paper intends to highlight the divergence and convergence of the two modes of religious naturalism as represented by these two thinkers and shows that there is sufficient room in the naturalistic philosophy of religion to accommodate both, idealism and materialism.

II. Vivekananda and the Scientific Framework in Religion

The task that Vivekananda set before himself was to establish Hinduism on secure foundations. Enamored of the ideas of rationalism, he knew that religion could be shown to be as natural and scientific a phenomenon as any other. In one of his earlier lectures in America, he says, "Is religion to justify itself by the discoveries of reason, through which every other science justifies itself? Are the same methods of investigation, which we apply to sciences and knowledge outside, to be applied to the science of religion? In my opinion this must be so." (Vivekananda, 1998: 40) A palpable eagerness to demonstrate that religion does not spring out of ignorance and superstition but is indeed the product of the highest faculties of the human mind can be sensed in these words. However, at the same time, he also wanted to prove that religion possessed a greater truth than science was capable of. To do that, he knew that he would have to convince the materialists of his day that reason alone was not the only source of knowledge available to man nor was it necessary to replace reason by faith. To prove the

truths of religion, Vivekananda sought to show the validity of something beyond the mental and the rational: the spiritual plane. Talking about the sources of knowledge he says,

We find in all beings three sorts of instruments of knowledge. The first is instinct which you find most highly developed in animals; this is the lowest instrument of knowledge. What is the second instrument of knowledge? Reasoning. You find that most highly developed in man....Reason can go only a little way and then it stops, it cannot go any further; and if you try to push it, the result is helpless confusion, reason itself becomes unreasonable...Therefore there must be some instrument to take us beyond, and that instrument is called inspiration...It is reason that develops into inspiration and inspiration does not contradict reason but fulfils it. (Ibid: 76-77)

The religious teachers of the past had failed because they saw spiritual inspirations as unprovable or contradictory to reason. To Vivekananda, not only were they not contradictory, they in fact fulfilled reason. These inspirations, which he described as super sensuous perceptions, were not abnormalities of the human mind but dormant potentialities that opened up vistas hitherto unknown to the human consciousness. Latent in each one of us is this possibility though it is rarely able to manifest. Man is naturally endowed with this ability to transcend the senses and reach the super-conscious state. And this state reveals to the individual the fact of unity, of cosmic oneness. Thus once again we are face to face with the fact that the evidence for the claims of religion are not to be sought in external authority but in the higher nature of man. He discovers the common ground in "the human constitution". (Ibid: 42) One of the common elements of all religions is the experience of this transcendental state. He says, "in all organized religions, their founders, prophets and messengers are said to have gone into states of mind that were neither waking nor sleeping, in which they came face to face with a new series of facts relating to what is called the spiritual kingdom." (Ibid: 25)

Having accepted that religion should stand scrutiny to tests of rationality, how actually did Vivekananda proceed to fortify religion against the assaults from science? What was the method that he adopted? We can better understand his response in this regard if we keep in mind the late 19th century optimism in

human capabilities. It was an era of unparalleled hope; science had convinced man that the ultimate solutions of the universe were at hand. Beginning with the dazzling power of Newtonian mechanics and culminating in the marvelous inventions in the fields of electro magnetism and thermodynamics, no aspect of nature was considered impenetrable. Lord Kelvin's pronouncement that nothing new remained to be discovered in science succinctly captured the mood of the day, the feeling that science had reached its zenith. Vivekananda, a man who kept abreast of the latest developments in science, was not untouched by these exhilarating prospects of science. The question to him was, how could he adapt the theoretical methods of science to prove the religious facts? Could religion be turned into science? The solution he found was to fit religion into the two models of the scientific paradigm of the age - the mechanistic and the teleological models. Based on these models, Vivekananda strove to erect a foolproof theory of religion which would be immune to challenges from natural science. Mechanical science offered him several analogies and templates which could be utilized in the realm of religion. Take for example- the issue that bedeviled all liberal religious teachers and scholars ; how could the diversity of religions ranging from the most primitive to the most modern be justified without diminishing the importance of any one of them. In a remarkable transplantation of ideas, Vivekananda uses the physical law of the conservation of force, one of the bedrocks of the mechanical model of the universe to prove the universality of religions. He says, "...all these religions are different forces in the economy of God, working for the good of mankind; and that not one can become dead, not one can be killed. Just as you cannot kill any force in nature, so you cannot kill any one of these spiritual forces." (Ibid: 96) The adroitness with which science has been summoned to explain an allegedly sociological fact is a veritable tour de force in religious thought. But this is not where he ends. A habit of looking at a problem from all possible angles is what makes Vivekananda such a comprehensive and interesting thinker. The same argument is also proved using the theory of evolution, the pinnacle of teleological thinking in the post-Darwinian world. The theory of evolution was used to demonstrate how religions of all kinds, from the animistic primitive ones to the modern religions are the result of the natural evolutionary progress of the one religious truth- the oneness of the Individual with the Absolute. (Ibid: 69) Unlike those apologists of religion who tried to gloss over the apparent differences in religion by attributing it to the non-essential cultural elements, Vivekananda tried to show that from the evolutionary perspective, the

apparent diversity and dissension is naturally explained by viewing different religions as different stages of growth of the one Absolute Truth. An analogy he often repeats is that of the photographs of the sun taken at different times being essentially different pictures of the same sun. (Ibid.) Even more significantly, it also helped him justify his thesis that the Upanishadic ideal of Non-duality, the realization of the oneness of the self with the universe was indeed the acme of religiosity. The evolutionary paradigm thus serves a dual purpose; Vivekananda not only proves the validity of all religions, he also shows that in the end, all religions aspire to reach the Non-Dual state of complete unity—the Advaita Vedanta of the Upanishads.

Not only did he try to prove religion through Science, he tried to do the reverse too—prove science through religion. He said that in the depths of their pursuit, both science and religion are seeking the same thing—freedom. One seeks it externally while the other seeks it internally. Thus Freedom or “Mukti” becomes the key idea that binds both religion and science. God—whether of science or religion is “freedom idealized”. “Freedom” also is one of the two pivotal ideas around which Vivekananda’s thoughts revolved, the other being “perfection” —the twin goals of Vedanta as contained in the Upanishads, the sacred Hindu scriptures. The theme of freedom keeps recurring in Vivekananda’s thought and is the central key through which his entire philosophy is unlocked. All life is an attempt to break free from the bondage of body and mind in which we find ourselves encaged. A worm trying to crawl away from a huge locomotive, the paragon of the might of the industrial age, is the proof that one who struggles to attain freedom, even if it is a worm, is greater than something bound by laws of nature, the giant engine. (Ibid: 7) Similarly all human endeavor according to Vivekananda is an attempt to achieve freedom, no matter how noble or despicable. Whether it is sin or saintliness, the underlying imperative in each is an attempt to break the hold of nature over man. This is because the essential nature of man is freedom. Combined with the body, it has accepted the rule of nature and forsaken its original glory of complete independence. Religion is an attempt to enthrone man back in his original seat of regal freedom, lost to the usurper Nature. The state of bondage that the human soul finds itself saddled with, gives rise to an urge to throw away the yoke of natural laws and inhabit the world of infinitude. Vivekananda says, “We have been studying laws from the beginning and yet cannot-nay, will not-believe that man is under law. The soul cries ever, ‘Freedom, O freedom!’ With the conception of God as a perfectly free Being, man cannot

rest eternally in this bondage. ” (Ibid: 12) He further says, “What is death? What are terrors? Do you not see the Lord’s face in them? The whole world worships ease and pleasure and very few dare to worship that which is painful. To rise above both is the idea of freedom.” (Ibid: 14-15)

Freedom, the Transcendence of the senses through super-sensuous perception, the struggle to regain the infinitude of being, the idea of perfection- these are the cosmic principles that provides the impetus to all religions according to Vivekananda-whether it be the primitive forms of religion like the ancestral worship of the Chinese and the Egyptians or the nature worship of the ancient Aryans or the modern day religions. They are all paths to the same Truth, he famously proclaimed in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, the forum where he attained immortality. The crudest practices of ancient tribal religions was as much an expression of the human quest for liberation as the most sublime moments of ecstasy of a Christian mystic. As long as one experiences the Infinite, it does not matter what path is chosen- they all are grist to the mill. The emphasis on the importance of certain transcendental states, the breakthrough moments in religious path, is an important distinction because in Vivekananda’s conception of religion the focus is shifted from practice of morality to the experience of Truth.

III. Dewey and the Nature of Religious Pursuit

John Dewey, one of the pillars of American pragmatism, wrote prolifically and cemented the influence of Pragmatism on American life and society. In his long life, he contributed to almost every aspect of philosophical enquiry- from Logic and epistemology to ethics and religion. His religious views underwent significant change in the course of his life but his crystallized philosophy of religion can be found in his book, *A Common Faith* published in 1934. In this book, he starts with the distinction between a “religion” and the “religious” and pours scorn on the former. By “A religion” he meant the organized religions of the world, which he believed, are a conglomeration of cultural practices that only have the force of tradition to propel them forward. Critical of all organized religions, he stressed on the value of the sentiment of the “religious”, an attitude of reverence, awe and mystery that should ideally be central in the religion. This distinction between the “substantial religion” and the “adjectival religious”, is critical to his philosophy of religion. Here is what Dewey writes,

To be somewhat more explicit, a 'religion' always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinctive form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal. (Dewey, 1986)

The association of religion with the Supernatural is unfortunate for Dewey as is the modern attitude of complete rejection of all forms of religion because of the crudity and barbarity associated with its earlier versions. Dewey takes a midway stance, differentiating the noble elements of religions from the cruder ones, the above mentioned religious-religion dichotomy. However he is also quick to point out that there is nothing "sui generis" about the "religious" feeling. The "adjectival religious" is an attitude that is a common element in experiences in the aesthetic, the political, and the scientific domain. A piece of poetry is as capable of producing the adjectival "religious" as a so called mystical experience. Thus he distances himself from the liberal religionists as well who believe that there are mystical experiences vouchsafed to religion and which have cognitive significance. To Dewey, the adjectival "religious" is not a standalone experience but an attitude common to all authentic sublime experiences notwithstanding the category in which it falls. What distinguishes such an experience is not the inherent religious content or the manner in which it is brought about but the enduring results of such an experience—peace and calmness, a sense of fulfilment or a resolution of some deep existential problem.

Having clarified that what the 'religious' feeling is not, Dewey goes on to elaborate on what gives rise to this particular attitude in a human being. He believed that the fundamental characteristic of the 'religious' is that it is a conscious movement towards an ideal end, an end which has a deep and abiding moral value. As one scholar puts it, "Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal, because of an abiding conviction of its genuine value, is religious in quality. The term God may be used if it refers to the unity of all ideal ends in their tendency to arouse us to desire and action." (Ibid: 11) However, this ideal end, almost synonymous with the Divine in his definition of religion, is not an end that is a

static entity, existing outside of human beings or predetermined by nature but is an imaginative ideal posited by the human mind based on the possibilities that nature affords. In this, Dewey accepts, echoing Santayana, that the commonality between poetry and religion is imagination. This ideal end, moreover, is not simply an intellectual assent to an imaginary entity but has a moral quality about it rather than a propositional value. The ideal ends that evoke the religious attitude are moral ends. Some believe that this reduction of the religious to the moral is one of the weaknesses of Dewey's philosophy of religion. As Patrick Romanell, a Dewey critic remarks, "No matter how inclusive the ideal ends may be which prompt us to make the world of which we are an integral part a better place to live in, they as objects of our aspiration remain moral in nature, and not religious." (Titus, 1968) Dewey's manner of writing further compounds the problem as he never tackles this question directly and in most of his writing there is a blurring of the distinction between the two. He emphasizes the fact that the ideal end is not a given, not "already embedded in the existent frame of things." (Romanell, 1967: 63) Unwilling to concede any other process operative in Universe except the natural law, even the existence of an objective moral law is questionable. Thus we may strive to attain Justice but there is no justice or moral law inbuilt in the human world which we should or can aim to achieve.

Essentially Dewey associates the mundane concept of religion with a belief in the Supernatural, an extra cosmic Being or Personality and this is what he is against. Even though he puts his ideas in contrast to religionists of all hue, the bulk of his arguments is directed against people who believe in an unknown or unknowable entity which somehow is related to human existence in ways that are beyond the ordinary human capacities. Being a naturalist and an atheist, Dewey does not believe in any such Providence or power, whether it is an extra cosmic Personal God or a pantheistic immanent Presence. All that exists are human beings and nature and their interaction which is the only reality, a biological reality that aims to "accommodate" and "adapt". The brute fact is that there is an inanimate nature and there are human beings endowed with intelligence and imagination. There is a quality about human intelligence that makes it religious, not some transcendental mystical experiences beyond the reach of human mind. Of these experiences, he says, "He is bold to the point of rashness who asserts that intimate personal experience will never come within the ken of natural knowledge." (Dewey, 1986: 15) In summary, Dewey proposed essentially a unified moral vision of religion. Religion is a human project, a pursuit of the

moral ideals that are imaginatively unified by us and that arouse our emotions. It is a specific configuration of moral ideals. To formulate it in pragmatic terms the “adjectival religious” is an adaptive mechanism, to find better ways of adjusting to reality, natural and social. The “substantival religion” is a baggage from the past that we will do good to get rid of.

IV. Convergence and Divergence

There are two divergent ways in which one can be a naturalist in religion. Patrick Romanell, elaborating on these strands in the naturalistic tradition says, “Despite the great variety of naturalistic systems of philosophy since Thales, we may distinguish two primary types within the naturalistic tradition itself—a reductionist and an antireductionist.” (Ibid: 25) He identifies Democritus as typifying the reductionist strand and Aristotle, the anti-reductionist one. It is important to understand how Vivekananda and Dewey fit in this particular schema within the naturalistic tradition. Since Dewey out rightly denies any cognitive significance to “religious experience”, there is no worthwhile cognitive content in religion that needs to be resolved or reduced to simpler ideas. Thus, he cannot be labelled a reductionist in the religion. However he certainly is a naturalist in the other sense, the antireductionist teleological sense of naturalism, since he believed that human activity in the form of religion is directed towards a certain end and all that is truly valuable in religion, “religious” aspect of it, is a yearning to achieve a state where the “ ideal ends “ are realized. Vivekananda, on the other hand, ironically, is a religious naturalist in both ways. For him, there is genuine transcendental knowledge to be gained through religion but at the same time he reduces it to a psychological component of human nature, to wit, its yearning for perfection and freedom. Thus by reducing the cosmic experience to a personal element in human nature, he is a reductionist. Interestingly, as mentioned above, he also believes that religion is a process that is evolutionary in nature, both psychologically and sociologically. Psychologically, it is a personal quest for freedom and perfection by each individual and sociologically, different religions are different stages of that yearning to realize oneness with God. At a universal cosmic level too, he believes that all nature is programmed to evolve in the direction of freedom. Thus he is a Naturalist in a teleological sense as well. Widening the framework of naturalism in the above two senses and comparing the contours of their respective theoretical frameworks of religion, one can see

that there are possibilities of intersections as well as departures.

Firstly, on the fundamental question of what religion actually is and what purpose it serves, we find that though they seem to provide different answers, essentially, as far as the purpose of religion is concerned, they are pointing somewhat in the same direction. Dewey believes that the adjectival “religious” is an attitude which aspires to achieve the “ideal ends”. One of these ends is a “harmonization of the self” (Romanell, 1967: 59) Knight observes that for Dewey religion consists in “human experience of certain unseen powers... these unseen powers are those ideal ends that are projected in the human imagination and arise within the natural conditions and processes of human living. The imagination provides the unified notion of the self and the universe, and has a moral and religious function giving guidance to our contingent and transient practices by directing them towards the ideal ends that we currently envision.” (Dewey, 1986: 14).

If one were to discount the transcendental aspects of Vivekananda’s idea of religion, he too says that fundamentally, religion is a quest for freedom and perfection- “ideal ends” in Dewey’s terminology. However, this is where the similarity ends. Whereas the freedom that Vivekananda talks about is an individual experience of liberation, the “ideal ends” of Dewey are the social and communal ends of justice, peace and freedom. For Vivekananda, the desire for ultimate liberation from bondage, whether explicit or implicit, actuates all religious thinking. The human being finds himself fettered, both physically and mentally but spiritually, there is a latent awareness that makes its power felt now and then, the awareness of the inner Divine potentiality, which the human being seeks to achieve. Returning to Dewey, we find that while both emphasize the experiential aspect of religion, Vivekananda believes in the “sui generis” nature of the religious experience which Dewey does not. This is one of the greatest points of departure between the two thinkers. Vivekananda attributes “mystical experiences” a central place in religious thought while to Dewey it has very limited importance. Dewey, in fact, believes that these experiences, stripped of their cultural and psychological content, are reduced to nothing of lasting importance. According to Knight, Dewey himself had such powerful mystical experiences in the early phase of his life but this did not lead him to view them in any favorable way even though it had a lasting impact on him. Commenting on Dewey’s attitude towards it, Knight writes “...he attributed it to aspects of his own psychology, he found it significant none the less.” (Knight, 1998: 17) Dewey

takes a decidedly Pragmatist stance when assessing these so called peak experiences. He says that, “The actual religious quality in the experience described is the effect produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production.” (Ibid: 15-16) Thus the impact of an experience on the psychological condition of the individual who has undergone such experience combined with its social utility is the true significance of such experience. In contrast Vivekananda was quite emphatic that these experiences by nature are not psychological but transcendental and their impact cannot simply be assessed by calculating the beneficial results of such experiences. He understood them as belonging to a different order of experience altogether, “the numinous”- to use Rudolf Otto’s term. Thus we find that there is too wide a divergence on this issue between Dewey and Vivekananda to hazard reconciliation.

Though thoroughly imbued by the spirit of Enlightenment, Vivekananda, as has been mentioned earlier, believed that the scientific methods are not fully capable of doing justice to religious experiences. This he attributed to the dogmatic stance that the materialistic sciences adopt with regard to religion. Castigating science for looking down upon religion, he says, “What is needed is a fellow feeling between the different types of religion,...and those expressions of religion whose heads, as it were, are penetrating more into the secrets of heaven, though their feet are clinging to the earth, the so called materialistic sciences.” (Dewey, 1986: 10) Dewey on the other hand relied solely on the rational, scientific method discarding all transcendental as subjective and unverifiable. Moreover, it would actually not be fair to compare these two intellectual giants in terms of experiences because they came from such vastly different backgrounds. Vivekananda was a mystic who practiced various techniques of meditation and therefore, it is highly likely that he had many more such experiences than Dewey, a scholar devoted to intellectual pursuits.

The other major point of difference between the two is regarding the relationship between morality and religion. Dewey viewed religion as a form of enlarged morality. Thus Dewey, according to Patrick Romanell, a Dewey scholar and contemporary, emphasized the “conative aspect of religion while downplaying the cognitive aspect.” (Vivekananda, 1998: 36-37) In his criticism of Dewey, Romanell argues that there is an absence of the notion of Sacred in Dewey’s philosophy of religion. A lack of the appreciation of the “Ganz Andere” quality of the religious, as Rudolf Otto had suggested, vitiates Dewey’s conception of the adjectival “religious.” However there is some disagreement on

this point. While Romanell believes that Dewey does not sufficiently emphasize the non-ethical transcendental aspects of religion when he characterizes religion as a pursuit of ideal ends, Knight in his assessment believes that there is a moment when a qualitative shift from the ethical to the religious takes place in Dewey's ideas. According to Knight, though the search begins with a moral objective, he believes that when it acquires the quality of "total inclusiveness, we move from a merely moral faith to a faith that is religious." (Romanell, 1967: 62) Romanell does not concur with this conclusion and maintains that there is a conspicuous lack of the concept of "holy" as opposed to the "ethical" in Dewey's writings on religion. There is some truth in Romanell's charge here. Dewey's refusal to accommodate any mode of enquiry other than the scientific precluded him from experiencing the "wholly other" aspect of religion. Even when Dewey talks about the "adjectival religious", this attitude is valuable not because of a contact with a Divine source but as a better continuation of the mundane life. The notion of the "Enlightenment"—in the eastern sense of the word—is conspicuously absent in Dewey.

For Vivekananda, a mystic, the notion of "Sacred" forms the very core of religion for he believed that all universe is viewed as a form of Divine presence by the religious person. Without consciously invoking the Sacred-Profane dichotomy, which in any case gained traction after Rudolf Otto's seminal work in that field, Vivekananda's concept of religion is thoroughly imbued with the idea of the "Holy" or the "Sacred". There is a clear cut demarcation between the "ethical" and the "religious" in his thoughts. Religion was not an enlargement or idealization of ethics. God is a concept beyond the binaries of good and evil, and a quantitative augmentation of goodness is not the aim of religion. It might be a byproduct of religious life, but ethics is subservient to religion and not vice versa.

As usual, Vivekananda approaches the question of Ethics from various directions. On the one hand, he finds the cosmic principle, an impersonal law behind the ethical consciousness. That is how he explains the presence of a universal moral instinct. On the other hand, he takes up the gauntlet thrown by the ethical theories of the day and then goes on to prove how the religious ideals are justified in the light of the very principles those ethical theories espouse, especially Utilitarianism.

On the question of why there should be an ethics at all, Vivekananda answers that ethics is a result of the fact that individuals find their yearning for freedom thwarted at every step. The cause of our moral instinct can be found in this

psychological condition. An incessant dissatisfaction plagues us because in the depths of our being we are convinced that we are heirs to a luminous heritage. The irrepressible urge to reclaim our freedom and infinitude is confronted by our limited nature and we struggle to get hold of the infinite through the only means available to us, our mind and senses. It is then we realize that this infinity is not to be attained by self-centeredness but by self-expansion. Behind the exhortation to be unselfish, the core of all ethical principles, lies this need for self-expansion though individually we may not be aware of it. In one of his lectures, Vivekananda says, "To manifest the Infinite through the finite is impossible and sooner or later man learns to give up the attempt to express the infinite through the finite. This giving up, this renunciation of the attempt is the background of ethics." (Knight, 1998: 18) This, Vivekananda says, is the reason why all ethics lays emphasis on self-sacrifice and altruism. The very basis of ethics is to put ourselves at the last and put the interest of others at the fore front. The death of selfishness, the keynote and cornerstone of all ethical ideas is not merely a device to keep society in check as has been claimed by most thinkers. It is not a compromise that we conveniently choose because of a transactional benefit of safety and security and rule of law in society. It is a manifestation of a deeper cause which is the hankering after infinite joy and freedom. There is a direct link between our transcendent psychology and ethics.

Having established the foundations of ethics, Vivekananda then goes on to point out how the ethical theory of Utilitarianism did not in essence understand the truth of its own principles. He did not believe that the origin of ethics lies in the utilitarian ideal of doing good to a society. The real reason for the Utilitarian formulation is not that the society should be benefitted but that it is an expression of man's desire to grasp the infinite, the ultimate end of all pursuits. Here is what Vivekananda had to say about this, "Ethics itself is not an end, but the means to an end. If the end is not there why should we be ethical?" (Vivekananda, 1998: 28)

Having dismissed the Utilitarian notion of the cause of ethics, he then goes on to justify religion on Utilitarian principles as well. Here he adopts a distinctly John Stuart mill style of argument regarding hedonistic Utilitarianism - the qualitative difference of pleasures. Vivekananda tries to prove that spiritual experience is the highest quality of pleasure possible. He says, "...even on the Utilitarian ground that man is to seek for pleasure, he should cultivate religious thought, for it is the highest pleasure that exists." (Ibid: 29) Despite the fact the he

had little in common with the central premise of the Utilitarian, that man is made for pleasure and that we should do only that which maximizes happiness, even a Utilitarian will be hard pressed to argue that religion does not fulfil utilitarian goals. In contrast to the Utilitarian goal of happiness or pleasure, Vivekananda explicitly states that “Not pleasure but knowledge is the goal of man.” (Ibid: 32-33)

Thus we find that in the realm of morality and ethics too, Vivekananda and Dewey are irreconcilable. One believes in the transcendental origin of ethics while the other repudiates any attempt to find ideal ends in “the existent frame of things.” Vivekananda believes that God is beyond both good and evil and the culmination of religion is in attaining a state that is trans-moral, beyond all dualities. Morality is subservient to the cosmic law. As he says in one of his lectures, “All the world has ever been preaching a God of Virtue. I preach a God of virtue and a God of sin in one. Take him if you dare. That is the one way to salvation; then alone will come to us the Truth ultimate that comes from the idea of oneness.” (Vivekananda, 1970: 30; 1998: 15) Dewey does not believe so. For Dewey, the ultimate end is moral; it is moral because human beings have consciously chosen it through their moral faith. There is no cosmic law which we are bound to obey. The kind of existence that we settle for is our creation and it depends on what ideals we choose for ourselves. For Dewey, the ethical is an end in itself. He does not subscribe to the view of a cosmic purpose towards which all our actions are directed, as if from backstage but a master director. We purposely give shape to our own religious journey and it should be the endeavor of humanity to place before itself the highest ideals of social life which should also become the ideals worth pursuing. He says, “I should describe this faith as the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.” (Dewey, 1986: 23) Thus religion is a matter of human reason, will and wisdom. The other important difference is on the question of whether there is a common essence of all religions. Here Dewey differs significantly from Vivekananda. Dewey firmly believed that the search for a common essence of all religions is a futile search. Commenting on Dewey’s thought on this issue, Knight says “For Dewey there is no unchanging central core or essence to religious faith. Neither does Dewey allow much time for the idea that the term “religion” denotes a single essence of which the various world religions are multiple expressions.” (Knight, 1998: 18)

For Dewey, religion does not point towards a summit of human possibilities but is one mode of expression of the human interaction with nature. This is in stark contrast with Vivekananda who believed that religion was the summit of human realization. For him, there is something called a common “religious instinct” of which all religions are myriad expressions. In fact, not only religion, Vivekananda believed that all human endeavors can ultimately be traced to this religious instinct. This instinct is reduced to a simple formula, which also encapsulates, as mentioned earlier, the central idea of his religious concept- the desire to achieve freedom and perfection through an experience of oneness with the universe. The aim of religion is to manifest the latent perfection within. (Vivekananda, 1998: 84) According to Vivekananda, this constitutes the essence of all religions, whether they admit it or not. Moreover, as remarked earlier, different religions are at different stages of the evolutionary ladder but their ultimate aim is the attainment of the Advaita, Non-dual state. Dewey was no stranger to the idea of evolution. But he was far from claiming that evolutionary method pointed to any evolutionary process in the field of religion nor did he believe that there was a progressive advancement of religious ideals from primitive religion to the modern established ones. Vivekananda’s attempts to reconcile the disparate elements of all religions into a coherent system would absolutely be anathema to Dewey. He says, “For we are forced to acknowledge that concretely there is no such thing as religion in the singular. There is only a multitude of religions. “Religion” is a strictly collective term and the collection it stands for is not even of the kind illustrated in textbooks of logic. It has not the unity of a regiment or assembly but that of any miscellaneous aggregate. Attempts to prove the universality prove too much or too little.” (Dewey, 1986: 7) He goes on to say further that “the differences among them are so great and so shocking that any common element that can be extracted is meaningless.” (Ibid)

It is in the relationship between human and nature that we find a close resemblance in the ideas of these two thinkers even though the reasons are divergent. Vivekananda was emphatic that the destiny of human being was to conquer nature, escape the laws that nature imposes on human existence. In a memorable passage in one of his lectures, he says, “Man is man so long as he is struggling to rise above nature.” (Vivekananda, 1998: 28) The rising above nature is a quest for liberation also known as Moksha in Hinduism. But instead of interpreting liberation simply as the release from the cycle of birth and death as the traditionalists generally do, Vivekananda believed that true liberation consists

in understanding and controlling nature, both internal and external. Beyond the body and the mind, above the natural laws is the essence of our existence, the Soul or the Atman with which we have to unify ourselves. This can only be done if we understand the inner natural laws, the subtle principles on which the mind works. Science, the conquest of external nature, too, arises from this inner desire to understand and conquer nature. Science begins from the outside world and seeks to understand the subtle cosmic laws that govern the cosmos. Religion begins from the inner world where it tries to discover the secrets of existence and our relation to the Universal Being. The grand purpose, where all scientific and religious endeavors converge is the ideal of freedom, freedom from the natural laws by understanding and controlling them.

Dewey has a similar opinion regarding the relation between man and nature. He was absolutely convinced of the efficacy of the scientific method in all realms of human activity. Science, to him, makes possible “the control of nature” (Dewey, 1930) and that is where its significance lies. However, his support for science is devoid of any religious purpose in the background. Dewey had no patience for a grand narrative that unites both religion and science as Vivekananda does. He says, “There is but one sure road of access to Truth- the road of patient cooperative enquiry, operating by means of observation, experiment, record and controlled reflection.” (Dewey, 1986: 23) Thus we find that both these gigantic figures in the field of religious thought approached the question of religion from their unique perspectives lending valuable insights for the study of the field. The inevitable divergences that emerge are reflective of the varied historical and cultural backgrounds which formed their respective views. It is also a study in contrast between two cultures, The East and the West and their take on religion in specific period of the late 19th century. It would be an interesting sociological and psychological study to see how both these thinkers assimilated the best of both worlds and yet based their own conclusions on their deepest convictions. It calls for an in depth biographical study of both the thinkers to trace the exact influences of their age which found expression in these different and contrasting strands in the naturalistic tradition- something outside the scope of the present work. However one can legitimately surmise a few things. The emphasis on asceticism, meditation and austerities to achieve enlightenment, the dominant theme of Eastern view of religion, especially Hinduism inevitably gives rise to a sort of Idealism that at times borders on solipsism. The uniqueness of Vivekananda lied in the fact that he was able to bring down the idealistic trait in

Hinduism to a practical level by incorporating features of naturalism into it. The Western Tradition, represented by Dewey, whose pragmatism was basically an intensely practical orientation towards the life of here and now, started from the other end of complete materialism but was able to incorporate the valuable insights of religion and mysticism and recognized that the complete flowering of the human potential requires developing an attitude towards life that characterizes all genuine religious experience.

Conclusion

Thus we see that these two thinkers from different backgrounds went about justifying their ideas in their unique ways. Vivekananda blended the traditional concepts of Hinduism with the scientific templates of his day to convincingly argue the case for a non-dualistic religion of Advaita. He deftly makes use of the reigning paradigms of his age, the reductionist, the evolutionary and the teleological to prove the religious truths, especially of Hindu philosophy. The social macrocosm is explained by the mental microcosm which in turn is explained by the universal cosmic macrocosm. By a constant juggling of the individual with the cosmic, the Personal with the Transcendental, Vivekananda manages to validate both the idealistic and the naturalistic aspects of religion. The common themes that bind his various ideas are the universal urge for freedom, the human possibility of reaching the superconscious state, the desire to realize infinite joy and power, the idealization of this infinitude as God and the ultimate realization of oneness with Godhead. Dewey, true to his pragmatist roots, saw in religion a potent force for betterment of society if pursued in the right way. Dismissing the cognitive aspects of religion in favor of the conative, he nevertheless saw immense value in the religious urge that compels us to seek an ideal world. However, many of these ideals retain remnants of our primitive past which have to be pruned in conformity with the enlightened morality of our age.

It is irrelevant to ask who was right or who was wrong. Both of them were great humanists who rose above the divisive features of religion and attempted to unlock the value that it possessed. Their means and ends differed. What unites both of them is their intense humanism. For Dewey, religion, in its traditional form has been a negative influence on humanity's march to progress and only by emancipating the truly "religious" from its "encumbrances" can religion be a force for good. Vivekananda adopts a much more tolerant approach for the

crudities of religion claiming that all forms of it, from the primitive to the highly developed, serve some purpose or the other in the human society or else they would have disappeared. The variety in religious practices was seen as a reflection of the variety in human temperament, each individual seeking his ultimate goal through a path that suits his nature. Instead of each individual adapting and choosing a religion based on enlightened modern ideals, as Dewey would approve, Vivekananda thought that it is religion that has to adapt itself to each individual. The shape and direction of a society is determined by the power of ideas. Both Dewey and Vivekananda influenced society and culture of their time, especially America, in their respective ways. Coming from disparate backgrounds, each was nevertheless ahead of their times and devoid of bigotry or narrow mindedness. In the end, it is the unique fortune of our age to have profited from the wisdom that these sages from the East and the West brought to the world.

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